

The Old Swamp Fox: General Francis Marion

By Joyce Furstenau

Brigadier General Francis Marion was an American patriot. He was one of the heroes of the American Revolution. Francis was born in 1732 in Saint James Parish, South Carolina. He was the youngest of six children born to Gabriel and Esther Marion. He was quite small at birth. He was in frail health as a child. His family came from France. He learned to speak French fluently.

At age fifteen, Francis decided to become a sailor. He asked his parents' permission and they agreed. They felt that time at sea might improve his health. His ship sailed to the West Indies. On the return trip, a whale rammed the schooner. The schooner sank. The crew escaped in a small boat. All the food was lost. The crew nearly died from starvation. After six days, two men died, but the others finally reached shore. Even though the trip greatly improved his health, Francis decided the sea was not for him.

Francis began his military career on his twenty-fifth birthday. He and his brother were recruited for the French and Indian War to fight the Cherokees in 1759. He continued to serve his colony as a member of the South Carolina Provincial Congress in early 1775. In April of that year, the Revolutionary War began.

On June 21, 1775, Francis Marion was commissioned as a captain to defend Fort Sullivan and Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island in Charleston Harbor. The British attacked the island on June 28, 1776. The fort, built from Charleston's palmetto logs, provided the soldiers with good protection. It has been said "there were reports of cannon balls actually bouncing off the walls of the structure." Charleston was saved from capture.

In September 1776, the Continental Congress commissioned Francis Marion as a lieutenant colonel. He took part in the "Siege of Savannah" and in the process, broke his ankle. He escaped capture by the British during the Charleston Massacre in 1780 because he was out of the area recovering from the broken ankle.

The only area of South Carolina that was not occupied by the British was the Williamsburg area. Gates put Francis Marion in charge of the Williamsburg militia. Still suffering from pain in his ankle, he organized the small troop of men to continue fighting the British. At one point he managed to recapture 150 Maryland prisoners from the British. Instead of joining him to continue the fight, his newly freed prisoners deserted.

Francis Marion found that he worked well with the irregular soldiers. Irregular soldiers were those who were not paid and supplied their own horses and sometimes even their own food. The troop called themselves "Marion's Men." His troops were seldom asked to go face to face with the British. Instead, he repeatedly surprised the British with quick attacks and quick withdrawals. These sudden, unexpected attacks by an "unofficial" military group are called *guerilla warfare*.

Although the British had captured Charleston, they could not capture Williamsburg. At the Battle of Black Mingo Creek, Marion and his troops scattered the British, and they were driven into a nearby swamp. By now, the British had begun to hate Marion.

In November of 1780, the British sent Colonel Tarleton to capture or kill Marion. Marion managed to elude the Colonel by traveling along swamp paths. It was Tarleton who gave Francis Marion the name "the old Swamp Fox."

Once Marion showed his expertise at guerilla warfare, he was commissioned as brigadier-general of the state troops. In June of 1782, he and his troops put down a Loyalist uprising on the banks of the Pee Dee River. It has been said that Marion's victories turned the tide in the American Revolution.

After retiring from military duty, Francis Marion married and served several terms in the South Carolina State Senate. He died in 1795 at the age of 63. His story was one of the influences for the Mel Gibson film *The Patriot*.



Name _____



Date _____

More than sixty-five towns and counties across the United States are named after Francis Marion including both Marion County, South Carolina, and the town of Marion, South Carolina. In 2008, a monument honoring Francis Marion was approved by Congress to be built in Washington D.C.

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Questions

_____ 1. In which state was Francis Marion born?

- A. Virginia
- B. North Carolina
- C. South Carolina
- D. Georgia

2. At what age did Francis Marion begin his military career?

_____ 3. What was Marion's first war experience?

- A. Battle of Bull Run
- B. Civil War
- C. Revolutionary War
- D. French-Indian War

_____ 4. Fort Moultrie was constructed from what type of logs?

- A. palmetto
- B. cedar
- C. birch
- D. pine

_____ 5. What are sudden, surprise military attacks called?

- A. germ warfare
- B. guerilla warfare
- C. atomic warfare
- D. surprise warfare

6. A memorial to Francis Marion has been approved by Congress for what city?

Name _____



Date _____

What do you think prompted a military officer such as Marion to issue receipts for supplies that his men needed to fight the British?

Historians tell us that Francis Marion gave receipts to colonists for horses, boats, weapons, and food supplies that were commandeered or were destroyed to keep from falling into the hands of the British. Further, it is said that many of Marion's receipts were presented to the new state government after the war, and the state paid the claims. How do you think this contributed to Marion's legacy?
